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CHURCHILL'S WRITING OF HISTORY: APPEASEMENT, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND *THE GATHERING STORM*

By David Reynolds

CHURCHILL'S life was politics. His career as an MP ran, virtually unbroken, from 1900 to 1964 – almost the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. But although Churchill lived for politics, he lived by writing. Much of his income was earned as a journalist and author. At one end of the spectrum were scores of newspaper columns assessing contemporary events and politicians, summarising the plots of great novels, or just musing for money – as in ‘Have You a Hobby?’ or ‘Are There Men in the Moon?’ At the other extreme are large books such as the biographies of his father (1906) and of his martial ancestor, the first duke of Marlborough (1933–8), and his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956–8). Somewhere in between are autobiographical vignettes such as *The Malakand Field Force* (1898) and *My Early Life* (1930). But it is for his two sets of war memoirs that Churchill the historian is most remembered – six separate volumes on World War I (1923–31) and its aftermath, six more on World War II and its origins (1948–54).

J.H. Plumb observed that Churchill's historical work could be divided into two categories: ‘formal, professional’ histories and those dealing with ‘contemporary events in which he himself was involved.’¹ Yet there is a sense in which, for Churchill, all history was autobiography. In July 1934, in an obituary of his much-loved cousin, ‘Sunny’, 9th duke of Marlborough, he wrote of ‘the three or four hundred families which had for three or four hundred years guided the fortunes of the nation’.² Prominent among them, of course, were the Churchills, from the first duke via Lord Randolph to Winston himself. In his view, British history was a narrative of the deeds of great men (definitely men), and most of those men were intertwined with the saga of his own family. This approach to history and politics naturally privileges the significance of the individual and the uniqueness of events. By contrast, the thrust of most modern historiography has been to subsume the individual into

¹J.H. Plumb, ‘The Historian’, in A. J. P. Taylor, *et al.*, *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man* (1969), 130. See also Maurice Ashley, *Churchill as Historian* (1968).

²Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Companion* (hereafter Gilbert, *CV*), v, part 2 (1981), 820. Like all students of Churchill, I am indebted to Martin Gilbert's volumes of biography and documents.

larger patterns (Marxism, the Annales school, the linguistic turn) or to emphasise the role of individual at the lower levels of society rather than through politics at the top.

Today, therefore, Churchill's philosophy of history is bound to seem somewhat outmoded. Yet his historical writings have been immensely influential, none more so than *The Second World War*, which between 1948 and 1954 was serialised in eighty magazines and newspapers worldwide, and went on to appear in hardback in fifty countries and eighteen languages.³ Although Churchill was at pains not to describe his account as history, 'for that belongs to another generation', he expressed confidence that it was 'a contribution to history which will be of service to the future'.⁴ Privately he was less diffident. He liked to say, on matters of controversy, that he would leave it to history but would be one of the historians. In the case of *The Second World War*, as Plumb observed, subsequent historians have moved down 'the broad avenues which he drove through war's confusion and complexity', with the result that 'Churchill the historian lies at the very heart of all historiography of the Second World War'.⁵ At the beginning of the twenty-first century, how should this work be evaluated?

In this short essay, I shall confine myself to some reflections on the opening volume, *The Gathering Storm*, and particularly the first of its two books, entitled 'From War to War', which covers the period from 1919 to 1939. For it is in this volume – published in the United States in June 1948 and in Britain in October – that Churchill made perhaps his most enduring 'contribution to history', through his critique of appeasement in the 1930s. His aim was 'to show how easily the tragedy of the Second World War could have been prevented; how the malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous'. What he called 'this sad tale of wrong judgments formed by well-meaning and capable people' was intended to prove that the conflict was indeed 'The Unnecessary War'. His purpose, in short, was 'to lay the lessons of the past before the future'.⁶ The Cassandra of the 1930s became the Thucydides of the 1940s.⁷

Before World War Two, 'appeasement', true to its French root, remained a neutral or even positive term, denoting the satisfaction of grievances by means of negotiation. Thereafter it became a term of

³ John Ramsden, 'That Will Depend on Who Writes the History': Winston Churchill as His Own Historian, Inaugural Lecture, Queen Mary and Westfield College, London, 22 October 1996, 12.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (hereafter *SWW*) (6 vols., 1948–54), 1, vii.

⁵ Plumb, 'The Historian', 149.

⁶ *SWW*, 1, vii–viii, 14, 270–1.

⁷ Cf. D. C. Watt, 'Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?', *Political Quarterly*, 36 (1965), 198.

abuse, signifying peace at any price; likewise 'Munich' is now a synonym for betrayal. The supposed 'lessons' of appeasement have haunted postwar policymakers in America and Britain, be it Harry Truman over Korea in 1950, Anthony Eden during the Suez crisis of 1956, George Bush after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, or the Blair government during the Kosovo war of 1999.⁸ Of course, Churchill did not teach those lessons single-handed. Three Beaverbrook journalists, including Michael Foot, had already indicted Britain's leaders of the 1930s in the aftermath of Dunkirk – so successfully that their polemic against the *Guilty Men* sold 200,000 copies in its first six months.⁹ Two other books also published in 1948 – *Munich, Prologue to Tragedy* by John Wheeler-Bennett and *Diplomatic Prelude* by Lewis Namier – took a similar line to *The Gathering Storm*. But Churchill's account of the interwar years was in a class of its own, selling its first 200,000 British copies in only two weeks.¹⁰ Lengthy serialisation in *The New York Times*, *Life* magazine, and *The Daily Telegraph* (the latter running to forty-two extracts over two months) brought its principal themes to a huge audience. Nor was there anyone of comparable stature to defend appeasement. Britain's three premiers of the 1930s had all died discredited, without having written their memoirs – Ramsay MacDonald in 1937, Neville Chamberlain in 1940, and Stanley Baldwin in December 1947. Keith Feiling's official biography of Chamberlain, published in October 1946, did little to dispel the cloud of disapproval. What D. C. Watt has dubbed 'the Churchillian critique of appeasement' has held sway at a popular level for two generations.¹¹

During that time, however, the historical documentation for the 1930s has changed dramatically. In the early 1970s, the official documents for the 1930s and World War Two became available at the Public Record Office under the new Thirty-Year Rule. Over the next decade a series of revisionist histories offered a more sympathetic account of the dilemmas faced by the appeasers. By the early 1980s, the interwar volume of Martin Gilbert's official biography, plus three massive companion volumes of documents, had provided much greater information about Churchill's views in the 1930s. And in the late 1990s, Churchill's original papers from the 1930s and 1940s were opened to

⁸ Ernest R. May, 'Lessons' of the Past: *The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1973), 80–2; Anthony Eden, *Full Circle* (1960), 514–18 (where he uses the same image of a gathering storm); Alex Danchev, 'The Anschluss', *Review of International Studies*, 20 (1994), 97–101; David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (second edn, 2000), 293.

⁹ 'Cato', *Guilty Men* (reprint edn, 1998), xv.

¹⁰ See Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge, Winston Churchill papers (hereafter CHUR), 4/24B, f. 334.

¹¹ Watt, 'Churchill and Appeasement', in Robert Blake and Wm Roger Louis, eds., *Churchill* (Oxford, 1993), esp. 199–201.

public inspection. Thus, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, historians can view appeasement, Churchill and *The Gathering Storm* from a new perspective. This essay, part of the larger project on the war memoirs, is a contribution to that reappraisal.

Given its historiographical impact, it is ironic that *The Gathering Storm* nearly did not appear. Churchill's basic contract was for four volumes, not six. Volume one was initially intended to run to the end of 1940 – a period eventually covered in two volumes. As late as January 1947, he envisaged only five chapters to take the reader from 1919 to the outbreak of war in September 1939. One chapter would survey the period 1919 to 1934, a second would deal with the rise of Hitler, 1931–8, and a third would examine British rearmament up to 1939. After a chapter devoted to Munich, one more, entitled 'The Interlude', would take the reader up to the outbreak of war.¹² It was not until Churchill began seriously to work on the interwar years during 1947 that the scope of this part of the book expanded dramatically, with outlines for eleven chapters, seventeen and even twenty-four chapters, before contracting down to the final twenty-one.

Self-evidently, five sketchy chapters about the appeasement era in a volume running to December 1940 would have had far less impact than the eventual first book of *The Gathering Storm*. Indeed the title itself, so evocative for Churchill's thesis, only emerged late in the day. Until October 1947, Churchill's working title was 'The Downward Path', for which he then substituted 'Toward Catastrophe'. Both of these seemed too negative to his publishers, particularly in the United States, given that the chapters were supposed to form the overture to his belated entry into Number Ten Downing Street. On 30 January 1948, just a few weeks before serialisation was to begin, Churchill was still canvassing suggestions for the title. It was his veteran literary agent, Emery Reves, who came up with the phrase 'The Gathering Storm'. This conveyed the sense of looming danger in a suitably 'crescendo' form.¹³

Why did the thrust of *The Gathering Storm* emerge relatively late in the day? There are, I think, three main reasons, each of them illustrative of Churchill the historian – the sources at his disposal, his method of writing and his sensitivity to the present.

As with most of his books since the biography of his father, Churchill employed a team of researchers. For *The Second World War*, this was an immensely distinguished team. Its anchor was William Deakin, a professional historian and Oxford don, who had particular responsibility

¹² See outlines in CHUR 4/74, f. 24 and CHUR 4/75, f. 1.

¹³ CHUR 4/74, ff. 43, 61, and CHUR 4/24B, ff. 317–319; cf. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, VIII (1988), 394–5.

for political and diplomatic matters. The naval side was handled by a retired officer, Commander Gordon Allen. For military affairs and high policymaking, Churchill used General Hastings Ismay, wartime military secretary to the cabinet, and General Sir Henry Pownall, who had been on the secretariat of the committee of imperial defence from 1933 to 1936 and was vice-chief of the imperial general staff in 1941. Ismay and Pownall were particularly well connected. The former was 'devilling' for Churchill even before he retired from the cabinet office in November 1946, while Pownall was a member of the advisory panel for the official military histories of the war, which gave him ready access to confidential material. Moreover, Churchill's prestige and connections also opened doors that would have been closed to ordinary historians.

In consequence, the source material for volume one is not simply Churchill's own documents from the period, as one might expect in the case of someone who was out of office. It also includes inside information of high quality on specific topics. For instance, on comparative air strengths in the 1930s, Pownall obtained statistical data from official contacts in France and the air ministry historical branch, while Churchill wrote direct to General Carl Spaatz, head of the Army Air Force in Washington, who had commanded the AAF in Britain in 1942. From half a dozen American agencies, Spaatz collated US data on German air strength.¹⁴ To take another example, Churchill's account of Anthony Eden's resignation as foreign secretary in February 1938 drew on the diary of Oliver Harvey, Eden's private secretary, and on comments by several government ministers of the time. It was even checked by the cabinet secretary, Norman Brook, against the cabinet minutes. Consequently, Churchill was able to reveal for the first time that Eden's breach with Chamberlain occurred over policy towards the United States as well as Italy – ironically giving the world a far fuller account of this episode than Eden himself had done hitherto. In short, Churchill's indictment of appeasement was that of an outsider blessed with inside information. This was the case for the prosecution garnished with evidence from the defence.

The wealth of information that became available to Churchill is, I think, one reason why his account of the 1930s expanded so dramatically and why he found it difficult to control. A second reason is the way Churchill worked: he did not marshal that mass of information until late in the day. His preoccupation in 1946 and the first half of 1947

¹⁴ See correspondence in CHUR 4/140A: the graph comparing French and German output of first-line aircraft, printed as appendix E of *The Gathering Storm*, was based on material provided via Pownall's friend, General Alphonse-Joseph Georges – *ibid.*, ff 23–32.

was the summer and autumn of 1940, when he was in power and Britain's fate lay in the balance. Meanwhile, his researchers were compiling essays on specific topics, using the official documents to which they had access as well as published sources such as the Nuremberg trials. At the same time, they were collating Churchill's own documents from the 1930s, particularly his speeches and correspondence with government ministers. These were printed as galley proofs at an early stage, allowing him to cut and paste lengthy quotation into his text. This was Churchill's standard method of writing his histories. After absorbing the material, he would start to cast it in his own mould, usually in lengthy late-night orations as he paced up and down his study at Chartwell – a pair of secretaries taking turns with the shorthand, research assistants in attendance to give factual advice. He wrote, as he liked to say, 'from mouth to hand'.¹⁵

But this was an incremental process. Not only the documents but also Churchill's own text were produced as galley proofs: he preferred to revise from the printed page, often doing minor corrections in bed first thing in the morning. These galley proofs went through three, four or even five versions, with titles such as 'Almost Final', 'Provisional Final' and 'Final' (to which the caveat was added, in large type: 'Subject to Full Freedom of Proof Correction'). Since no publisher would tolerate such a costly method of editing, Churchill did this at his own expense (out of the munificent advances), using the Chiswick Press, a branch of the publishers Eyre and Spottiswoode.¹⁶ The eventual book was set up in new type from those galley proofs by his publishers, often very late in the day. This, incidentally, helps explain the numerous printing errors in the British edition of *The Gathering Storm*, which had to be rectified at the last minute by two pages of corrections and then a further errata slip. Some of these errors were deeply embarrassing. On page fifty-six of the first edition we are told that the French army was 'the poop of the life of France'. That is corrected on the errata slip: 'For "poop" read "prop".'

Gradually Churchill's dictated narrative put flesh on his documentary skeleton. But it was a common complaint – from his researchers, his publishers and not least his wife – that the bones still tended to show through. With so much of the material emanating from others, and with political duties as leader of the opposition taking up a good deal of time, Churchill found it hard to get his mind round the whole book. It usually required a special vacation, paid for by his publishers, at which Churchill, plus secretaries and members of his research team, engaged in what was known as 'bulldozing' the final text. This entailed

¹⁵ Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 31.

¹⁶ By June 1947 he already owed them over £1,400 – CHUR 4/24A, f.145.

pruning the quotations, or relegating them to the ever-swelling appendices, and ensuring that Churchill's own voice came through clearly. For the first volume, the bulldozing was done in the warmth and opulence of the Mamounia Hotel in Marrakesh between 11 December 1947 and 18 January 1948 (his wife stayed behind to enjoy the austerity of an Attlee Christmas). From Marrakesh, corrected galley proofs were sent almost daily to the Chiswick Press, and new proofs received with equal frequency. It was only at this late stage that the book took coherent shape.

As Churchill bulldozed the 1930s, he brooded on the 1940s. In mid-November, he received a message from Henry Luce, the owner of *Life* magazine, who was still unhappy that the mass of documents marred the 'architectural sense' and impeded 'analytical insight'. Churchill replied defensively that he had so far been assembling the material in chronological order and had not yet had time 'to read Book I through at a run'. This he said he would do at Marrakesh. The analytical point he intended to bring out was that 'in those years there happened exactly what is happening today, namely no coherent or persistent policy, even in fundamental matters, among the good peoples, but deadly planning among the bad. The good peoples, as now, drifted hither and thither, to and fro, according to the changing winds of public opinion and the desire of public men of medium stature to gain majorities and office at party elections.'¹⁷

Churchill had used the phrase 'The Unnecessary War' at least as early as October 1940. He deployed it publicly in a major speech in Brussels in November 1945.¹⁸ So the basic theme was not new. But his conviction that the conflict had resulted, in large measure, from a failure of political leadership sharpened in 1946–8 amid the deepening Cold War. For Hitler, read Stalin (each engaged in 'deadly planning'); for Baldwin, read Attlee (those 'public men of medium stature'). In his 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton in March 1946 he insisted that there 'never was a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action', adding 'I saw it all coming and cried aloud to my own fellow-countrymen and to the world, but no one paid any attention.' And so, said Churchill, 'one by one we were all sucked into the awful whirlpool. We surely must not let that happen again.' The analogies were reiterated in his political speeches during 1948, at the same time as his account of the 1930s unfolded in newspaper articles and then in volume form. The Berlin crisis, he told a mass rally of 100,000 Tories in June 1948,

¹⁷ Luce to Churchill, 18 Nov. 1947, and Churchill to Luce, 22 Nov. 1947, quoted in Gilbert, *Churchill*, VIII, 357–8.

¹⁸ John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939–1955* (1985), 278; Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963* (hereafter Churchill, *Complete Speeches*) (8 vols., New York, 1974), VII, 7251, 16 Nov. 1945.

'raises issues as grave as those which we now know were at stake at Munich ten years ago. It is our hearts' desire that peace may be preserved, but we should all have learned by now that there is no safety in yielding to dictators, whether Nazi or Communist.'¹⁹

It was this political moral, painfully apt for contemporaries, that gave the first book of Churchill's war memoirs its emotional power. Several readers went so far as to liken the story to a classical tragedy.²⁰ The gathering storm, clearly discerned on the horizon by men of vision, was ignored by politicians of lesser stature. How does Churchill's account stand up to scrutiny fifty years on? How far was he aware of its deficiencies at the time? In addressing these questions within a brief compass, I shall focus on four main issues: leadership, defence, foreign policy, and domestic politics.

Who were these mediocre leaders, blind to the gathering storm? Not surprisingly, Churchill is kind to the Conservative government of 1924–9, in which he was chancellor of the exchequer. This is a period of 'very considerable recovery' at home and genuine 'distinction' in foreign policy, particularly thanks to Treaty of Locarno. In 1929, 'the state of Europe was tranquil, as it had not been for twenty years, and was not to be for at least another twenty'. Thereafter the rot set in. The prime minister from 1929 to 1935 was Ramsay MacDonald, but Churchill has little to say about him. In the book, MacDonald is a shadowy figure, 'brooding supinely' and in a state of 'increasing decrepitude' over a predominantly Tory government after 1931.²¹

In *The Gathering Storm* the culpable figures are MacDonald's successors as premier, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. (They were also the two Tory leaders who kept Churchill out of office during the 1930s.) The best Churchill can say for Baldwin is that he was 'the greatest Party manager the Conservatives ever had'; we are told that he 'took no active share in foreign policy' apart from his 'well-known desire for peace and a quiet life'.²² Although Churchill did not write the famous index entry on Baldwin ('confesses putting party before country'), that summed up his sentiments. Whereas Baldwin was indicted for lethargy, political opportunism and indifference to foreign affairs; Chamberlain's crimes were hubris, illusions and mental rigidity. If Baldwin wanted to be left in peace, Chamberlain wanted to make peace. In dealing with Hitler, Churchill argues, this was folly of the highest order. He singles

¹⁹ Quotations from Churchill, *Speeches*, vii, 7292–3 (5 March 1946) and 7671 (26 June 1948).

²⁰ For instance, Alfred Duff Cooper to WSC, 5 August 1948, CHUR 4/19; Sir Harold Butler, 'Mr Churchill and the Unnecessary War', *The Fortnightly*, 163, Oct. 1948, 227.

²¹ *SWW*, 1, 30, 52.

²² *SWW*, 1, 26, 187.

out Chamberlain's 'long series of miscalculations, and misjudgments of men and facts', though acknowledging that his 'motives have never been impugned'.²³ In Churchill's account, each man, for different reasons, wreaks appalling damage – from indolence or arrogance, they facilitated Hitler's irresistible rise and thus an unnecessary war.

There is, however, a tension in Churchill's account. Baldwin was premier from 1935 to 1937, Chamberlain from 1937 to 1940. On Churchill's own admission, it was during the period 1931–5 that 'the entire situation on the Continent was reversed'. He says that 'once Hitler's Germany had been allowed to rearm without active interference by the Allies and former associated Powers, a second World War was almost certain'. (An earlier draft even used the word 'inevitable').²⁴ The years 1931–5 was the MacDonald era – hence Churchill's concern to represent Baldwin as 'the virtual Prime Minister' during that period.²⁵ But the main way in which he resolves the tension is to highlight a series of missed opportunities *after* 1935. In today's jargon, book one of *The Gathering Storm* is at times almost an exercise in counterfactual history.²⁶

At the beginning of chapter eleven, for instance, he depicts 'a new atmosphere in England' in early 1936. The obvious breakdown of collective security and a general backlash against the Hoare–Laval pact dividing up Abyssinia had, he argued, created a cross-party consensus that was 'now prepared to contemplate war against Fascist or Nazi tyranny'. Yet the government stuck to its 'policy of moderation, half-measures and keeping things quiet'.²⁷ Critically, there was no reaction to Hitler's re-occupation of the Rhineland in March. In an early draft of the end of chapter thirteen, Churchill had written: 'Nothing could have stopped Hitler after the seizure of the Rhineland except a very serious war.' In the published text, however, this categorical judgement is heavily qualified: 'Many say that nothing except war could have stopped Hitler after we had submitted to the seizure of the Rhineland. This may indeed be the verdict of future generations. Much, however, could have been done to make us better prepared and thus lessen our hazards. And who shall say what could not have happened?'²⁸

A second putative 'turning point' occurs at the end of 1936, where Churchill juxtaposes Baldwin's now notorious speech of 'appalling

²³ *SWW*, I, 173–4, 255.

²⁴ *SWW*, I, 52 and 148; cf. CHUR 4/85, f.4.

²⁵ *SWW*, I, 94.

²⁶ It is worth noting that in 1931 Churchill contributed a long essay under the title 'If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg' to a collection entitled *If It Had Happened Otherwise*.

²⁷ *SWW*, I, 147–8.

²⁸ CHUR 4/87, f. 65; cf. *SWW*, I, 186.

frankness' to the Commons on 12 November and the crisis over Edward VIII's abdication the following month. Through the 'Provisional Semi-Final' version Baldwin's speech was placed as the climax of an earlier chapter on the loss of air parity from 1933 to 1936. This documented Baldwin's February 1934 pledge that Britain would keep abreast of Germany, his denials of Churchill's warnings that parity had been lost, his May 1936 'confession' that it had and, finally, his 12 November admission that, had he gone to the country on a rearmament platform, the outcome would have been certain defeat. In this form, the chapter had enormous power as a cumulative indictment of Baldwin. But at the 'Provisional Final' stage, Churchill sacrificed that in order to play up another turning point. He moved the November material into a later chapter on 1936–7, 'The Loaded Pause', and there followed it with a two-page account of the Abdication (previously a single sentence at the end of the draft on 'Air Parity'). In this treatment, Baldwin's 'appalling frankness' in admitting 'that he had not done his duty with regard to national safety because he was afraid of losing the election' is described as 'an incident without parallel in our Parliamentary history'. The impression produced on the House was 'so painful that it might well have been fatal' to Baldwin but for his adroit handling of the king's affair. Just at this moment, asserts Churchill, the cross-party forces for 'Arms and the Covenant' that he had been marshalling were on the verge of a breakthrough. But the contrast between Baldwin's shrewd judgement of public opinion and Churchill's pleas that the king be given time (to get over his infatuation) turned the tables for the two of them. Churchill wrote that the forces he had gathered on defence were 'estranged or dissolved' and that 'I was so smitten in public opinion that it was the almost universal view that my political life was ended.'²⁹

Undoubtedly Baldwin did retrieve himself over the Abdication, but historian Paul Addison is surely right that Churchill greatly exaggerated the effect of the crisis on the 'Arms and the Covenant' movement. 'The reason why his campaign faltered after December 1936 was that 1937 saw a relaxation of Anglo-German tensions' that lasted until the Austrian Anschluss in March 1938.³⁰ Nevertheless, Churchill's interpretation has become widely accepted. Even more so has his version of what Baldwin told the Commons on 12 November. In *The Gathering Storm* Churchill's extracts from Baldwin's speech and his own commentary imply that Baldwin was referring to the 1935 election. In fact, as Baldwin's full text makes clear, he was referring to 1933–4, in the wake of the notorious 'pacificist' victory at the East Fulham by-

²⁹ *SWW* 1, 169–71; cf. CHUR 4/81.

³⁰ Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front, 1900–1955* (1992), 323.

election and was contrasting that with his success in gaining a mandate in 1935 on a clear, if cautious, platform for rearmament. All this was said by Baldwin in justification of his aphorism that 'a democracy is always two years behind the dictator'. Reginald Bassett suggested, just after *The Gathering Storm* appeared that Churchill was following a long line of writers who had quoted selectively and misleadingly from Baldwin's speech.³¹ In fact, it is possible that Churchill was in their vanguard. As drafts make clear, the highly expurgated version of Baldwin's speech used in *The Gathering Storm* was taken verbatim from Churchill's June 1938 collection of speeches entitled *Arms and the Covenant*. There the editor, his son Randolph, had appended some of Baldwin's words on 12 November 1936 to Churchill's own 'locust years' speech the same day.³² Ellipsis points in this text indicate two explicit omissions from Baldwin's words, but there are, in fact, three other unacknowledged gaps. Although proof copies of *Arms and the Covenant* do not survive in Churchill's papers, Winston made it clear to Randolph that 'I must have the final word in a matter which so closely concerns myself, upon what goes in or out.'³³ Whoever was responsible, this was an early and accessible version of the 'appalling frankness' speech, on which others may well have relied. In 1948 *The Gathering Storm* was following the pack hunting Baldwin, but *Arms and the Covenant* may have started them running a decade before.

Underpinning Churchill's account of the years 1936–8 is his hopeful estimate of potential German resistance to Hitler. Repeatedly he asserts or implies that a firmer stand by Britain and France would have destroyed Hitler's credibility and triggered a military putsch. This is evident in his treatment of the Rhineland crisis of 1936 and can be seen particularly in the key chapter about Munich. Churchill was confident that, if Britain and France had taken a tough line over Czechoslovakia, the German generals would have mounted a *coup* against Hitler. He took seriously their assertions to this effect at the Nuremberg trials and also under private interrogation, as relayed by Ismay from British military sources in Germany, particularly those of General Franz Halder, then army chief of staff. But readers of Churchill's draft questioned his interpretation. Sir Orme Sargent, the deputy under-secretary at the foreign office and critic of Munich in 1938, warned against 'overrating the possibility of an army revolt in September 1938 ... the generals were repeatedly planning revolts; but at the last

³¹ R. Bassett, 'Telling the Truth to the People: The Myth of the Baldwin "Confession"', *The Cambridge Journal*, II, 1 (Oct. 1948), 84–95, especially 95, note 1. See also Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (1969), 969–73.

³² SWW, I, 169; cf. CHUR 4/81, f.175, and *Arms and the Covenant*, 385–6.

³³ WSC to Randolph, 3 April 1938, Chartwell Trust papers, CHAR 8/598, ff. 1–2 (Churchill College, Cambridge).

moment they drew back, either because the situation was too favourable for Germany, or because it was so unfavourable that they could not as patriots play into the hands of the enemy'.³⁴ From inside Churchill's research team, Deakin also advised him not to 'put too much store on Halder's account', while Pownall said he had found no corroborative evidence in the foreign or cabinet office records and warned that 'Halder, as you know, is apt to "shoot a line".'³⁵ In response, Churchill softened his tone. The phrase 'We now know for certain what was happening on the other side' became 'We may now look behind the brazen front which Hitler presented to the British and French governments.' Echoing Sargent, he added the qualification that 'the generals were repeatedly planning revolts, and as often drew back at the last moment for one reason or another'. He also acknowledged: 'It was to the interest of the parties concerned after they were prisoners of the Allies to dwell on their efforts for peace.' But he retained a lengthy version of the generals' story and noted that it 'has been accepted as genuine by various authorities who have examined it. If it should eventually be accepted as historical truth, it will be another example of the very small accidents upon which the fortunes of mankind turn.' He summed up 'The Tragedy of Munich' as follows: 'Hitler's judgment had been once more decisively vindicated. The German General Staff was utterly abashed ... Thus did Hitler become the undisputed master of Germany, and the path was clear for the great design.'³⁶

Here is an excellent example of Churchill's principles of interpretation: contingency not determinism, an emphasis on individuals rather than broad forces, and the ostensible deference paid to 'history' while seducing future historians. Of course, Churchill's counterfactuals remain imponderable, but it is a tribute both to his vision and his craftsmanship that many of his turning points are the ones that scholars still ponder.³⁷ Although *The Gathering Storm* had not ended historical debate – far from it – Churchill was eminently successful in shaping the agenda.

³⁴ Sargent to WSC, 15 Dec. 1947, CHUR 4/141A. f. 126. Sargent was also drawing on the comments of his colleague Ivone Kirkpatrick, who had served in the Berlin Embassy in 1933–8.

³⁵ Memos by Pownall [20 Sept. 1947], and Deakin, undated [early 1948], in CHUR 4/91, ff. 98, 120–1.

³⁶ SWW, I, 243–6, 250; cf. CHUR 4/91, f. 113.

³⁷ For instance, Hitler's most recent biographer highlights the importance of the Rhineland occupation in 1936 for the Führer's domestic position and, while admitting it is 'an open question' whether the 'ill-coordinated' plotting in 1938 'would have come to anything', argues that the 'legacy of Munich was fatally to weaken those who might even now have constrained Hitler', Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (2 vols., 1998, 2000), I: 589–91, II: 123–5.

In shaping it, but not setting it in stone. If we look at Churchill's treatment of appeasement, we can see how *The Gathering Storm* is at odds with the revisionism of historians writing after the archives became open in the early 1970s.

On fundamental issues of defence and diplomacy, Churchill was, of course, essentially right. In the early 1930s he repeatedly urged that it was folly for the victors either to disarm or to allow Germany to rearm while German grievances had not been resolved. His whistle-blowing about the pace of German air rearmament after 1933 helped galvanise the government into belated action over air defence and his lurid warnings about Hitler's intentions were amply vindicated by the unfolding of events. The first book of *The Gathering Storm* documents Churchill's public statements about Hitler and his secret intelligence about German rearmament, often leaked by anxious officials, validating both against evidence from postwar sources. The official biography develops these themes with rich detail. But there is more to say on these matters. Air rearmament was not the totality of defence issues, nor the Nazi threat the sum of 1930s diplomacy.

It is now clear that Churchill was not so much a lone voice calling for rearmament in the 1930s but one of a number of actors – in office, officialdom, the military and parliament – engaged in a complex bureaucratic battle to shift the government from its early ignorance and complacency about the growth of the Nazi airforce. The leaks to Churchill were only a facet of this struggle, in which, for instance, Chamberlain shared Churchill's priorities more than Baldwin's. Yet even today, and certainly in the 1930s, reliable evidence is lacking for the growth of Hitler's Luftwaffe during its early years. Even numbers of aircraft, where the data exists, are an insufficient guide. What matters are serviceable front-line planes, in other words combat aircraft for which the Luftwaffe had fuel, spare parts and trained pilots to keep in the air in time of war. On these criteria, Richard Overy, a historian of the German war economy, has argued that Churchill exaggerated German potential, for instance predicting in September 1935 a total of 2,000 first-line aircraft by October 1936 and possibly 3,000 a year after that. In fact, says Overy, the figure was less than 3,000 even in September 1939. In any case, the statistics were not used at the time as precision weapons but rather as bludgeons to create alarm and thus provoke action. Churchill admitted as much in *The Gathering Storm*. 'I strove my utmost to galvanise the Government into vehemence and extraordinary preparation, even at the cost of world alarm. In these endeavours no doubt I painted the picture even darker than it was.'³⁸

³⁸ R. J. Overy, 'German Air Strength 1933 to 1939: A Note', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), 465–71, esp. note 5; *SWW*, 1, 180.

Churchill and others were partly victims of German disinformation, spread assiduously by General Erhard Milch and staff in the air ministry. But their exaggerations about the potential of the Luftwaffe were reinforced by exaggerated fears about bombing itself. During the course of the Second World War, 147,000 people were killed or maimed in the whole of the United Kingdom as a result of aerial bombardment.³⁹ But when Churchill addressed the Commons in November 1934 he predicted that, in seven to ten days of intensive bombing, at least 30,000 to 40,000 Londoners would be killed or maimed and that, 'under the pressure of continuous air attack', at least three or four million people would flee the metropolis for the surrounding countryside. In July 1936, he was even more alarmist. As part of delegation of senior MPs to see Baldwin, his estimates for bomb tonnage and casualty rates implied figures of 5,000 dead and 150,000 wounded from a single all-out raid on London.⁴⁰ Churchill was not alone in such fears. What Uri Bialer has called 'the shadow of the bomber' hung over British life throughout the 1930s. Writing in 1966, Harold Macmillan recalled that 'we thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear warfare today'. That was not mere popular paranoia, stirred up by H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and the like. In October 1936 the Joint Planning Sub-Committee of the Chiefs of Staff estimated that 20,000 casualties might be expected in London in the first twenty-four hours of an air attack, rising within a week to around 150,000.⁴¹

As Wesley Wark has shown, the exaggerations of German air strength and of the potency of bombing, to which Churchill contributed, had a counter-productive effect on the government. Having underestimated the German air threat in 1933–6, Whitehall swung to the opposite extreme in 1936–8. The fear of German airpower was much in the minds of both the chiefs of staff and Chamberlain himself as they debated whether to take a stand over Czechoslovakia. In reality the German air staff had concluded that they could not deliver a knock-out blow against Britain. But, as Chamberlain told his cabinet after his second visit to Hitler in September 1938 (and only his second round-trip in a plane), as he flew back up the Thames toward London 'he had imagined a German bomber flying the same course, he had asked himself what degree of protection they could afford to the thousands of homes which he had seen stretched out below him, and he had felt that we were in no position to justify waging a war today in order to prevent a war hereafter'.⁴²

³⁹ Basil Collier, *The Defence of the United Kingdom* (1957), 528.

⁴⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *Arms and the Covenant* (1938), 172–3; Gilbert, *CV*, v, part 3, 273–4.

⁴¹ Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change, 1914–1939* (1966), 575; Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber* (1980), 130.

The frenzied mid-1930s debate about the ‘air menace’ therefore helped galvanise RAF modernisation, but it also induced diplomatic paralysis. Moreover, it diverted attention from the other two services, particularly the army – a consequence deplored at the time by none other than Henry Pownall, then an army bureaucrat.⁴³ A British Expeditionary Force for France and Belgium was low on Churchill’s list of priorities. When he spoke of his ‘Grand Alliance’ with France, he meant ‘the Union of the British Fleet and the French Army, together with their combined Air Forces’. Or, as he put it in the early 1930s, ‘Thank God for the French Army.’⁴⁴ It is also worth noting that, in contrast with his passion for air rearmament, Churchill was slow to support peacetime conscription. Although this issue was popular with many local Conservative associations during 1938 and was pushed strongly by dissident MPs such as Leopold Amery, Churchill did not speak out on the matter and only signed two of the five Commons motions about national service introduced between July 1938 and April 1939. At late as 18 April 1939, after Hitler had devoured Czechoslovakia and Britain had guaranteed Poland, Churchill was not among sixty-five MPs (many of them Tories, including his son-in-law Duncan Sandys) who demanded ‘immediate acceptance of the principle of the compulsory mobilisation of the man, munition, and money power of the nation’. Compulsory national service had socialistic undertones and ran against national custom, but Churchill’s reticence also reflected his preoccupation with the air and sea, not the land. He wrote in a newspaper article in May 1938, ‘if our Fleet and our Air Force are adequate, there is no need for conscription in time of peace. No one has ever been able to give a satisfactory answer to the question: “What do you want conscription for?”’⁴⁵

As Donald Cameron Watt has observed, Churchill’s rearmament campaign ‘never focused on the issues that might have made an impact on German military opinion – military arms production, conscription, a Continental commitment’.⁴⁶ Air rearmament had a bias towards isolationism – the defence of the United Kingdom. Greater resources

⁴² Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Oxford, 1986), ch. 3; Cab 42 (38), 24 Sept. 1938, CAB 23/95 (Public Record Office, Kew).

⁴³ Pownall blamed ‘Air Panic’, whipped up by Churchill and others, for the July 1934 cutback in funds for the army expansion programme. See Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, v (1976), 553 note.

⁴⁴ Both of these remarks are quoted in *SWW* 1, respectively 179 and 59.

⁴⁵ N.J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators, 1935–1940* (1995), 158–63; cf. ‘Future Safeguards of National Defence’, *News of the World*, 1 May 1938, in Michael Wolff, ed., *The Collected Essays of Sir Winston Churchill* (4 vols., Bristol, 1976), 1, 402.

⁴⁶ Watt, ‘Churchill and Appeasement’, 204.

for the army would have implied a continental strategy, projecting British power across the Channel. In all this, of course, Churchill was broadly at one with Chamberlain, most politicians and public opinion. That is why in May 1940 there were only 10 British divisions alongside 104 French, 22 Belgian and 8 Dutch on the Western Front. Such were the ghosts of the Somme and Passchendaele that in 1934 MacDonald had decreed that the words 'Expeditionary Force' not be used in public statements or even official documents. As the military critic Basil Liddell Hart wrote of the Western Front of 1914–18, 'It was heroic, but was it necessary? It was magnificent, but was it war?'⁴⁷ Churchill agreed that, even if Britain had to fight, a repeat of Flanders Fields would indeed be an unnecessary war. What he does *not* say about rearmament in *The Gathering Storm*, therefore points us on to his equivocations about mass invasion of the continent in later volumes of memoirs. And his refrain, 'Thank God for the French Army' – which only voiced the unspoken assumptions of most policymakers – reminds us that he, like they, never imagined the collapse of the Western Front in 1940. In short, one might argue that Churchill's warnings against appeasement in the 1930s played a part in helping win the Battle of Britain, but they did nothing to avert the prior disaster of the Battle of France.

On foreign policy, as on defence, Churchill's retrospective concentration on Germany (informed by the events of 1940) distorts the diplomacy of the 1930s and, at times, his own part in it.

Since the revisionism of the 1970s, it is a commonplace of historical scholarship that British policymakers discerned a potential three-front threat in the 1930s. The menace of German airpower at home was reinforced by Japan's challenge to Britain's substantial interests in China and Southeast Asia and by Italy's threat to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Suez lifeline to India. Japan was, in fact, the main concern in the early 1930s, after its invasion of Manchuria, and this prompted the beginnings of British rearmament. Although the revival of German power, especially in the air, took precedence after Hitler gained power in 1933, in 1936–7 it was the combination of Mussolini's empire-building in Ethiopia and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War that preoccupied ministers and focused their attention on the Mediterranean. Not until 1938, with first the Austrian Anschluss and then the Czech crisis, did Germany in Europe return to centre-stage. But policymakers could not ignore the fact that, from July 1937, Japanese and Chinese forces were locked in a major war across eastern China.

In *The Gathering Storm*, however, Churchill's eyes are fixed on Berlin. After a couple of pages on the Manchurian crisis in chapter five, there is virtually nothing about events in Asia. Only from a minute by

⁴⁷ Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of His Military Thought* (1976), 68 and 85.

Churchill when first lord of the admiralty in February 1940, printed in an appendix, does one learn that Japan had 'for two and a half years been engaged in a most ruinous war in China'. The almost total omission of the Far East from the volume was noted by Denis Kelly, one of Churchill's junior research assistants, very late in the day, on 8 January 1948. At his suggestion a brief reference to Japan's signature in 1936 of the Anti-Comintern Pact was inserted in chapter twelve. Asked for his advice, Deakin suggested on 31 January that the Japanese story should be dealt with as 'an introduction to their entry into war' in 1941. 'All right', Churchill agreed, and the matter was relegated to volume three.⁴⁸

Although there is more reference to Mediterranean affairs in *The Gathering Storm*, they do not bulk large. To a considerable extent, as Robert Rhodes James observed thirty years ago, this mirrors Churchill's perspective in the 1930s. Warning the Commons about the real priorities as the Abyssinian crisis deepened in October 1935, Churchill pointed to German rearmament: '*There* is the dominant factor; *there* is the factor which dwarfs all others.'⁴⁹ Contrary to many League enthusiasts, notably Eden, Churchill was not keen to make Italian aggression a major moral and political issue. In Europe, Mussolini (about whom Churchill continued to make complimentary references in public) was a potential bulwark against German expansion. Churchill endorsed the Stresa agreement of April 1935, which committed Britain, France and Italy to maintaining the independence of Austria. On the other hand, Churchill could see the dangers to the League's credibility if its council in Geneva decided on half-hearted sanctions against Mussolini, which then failed. That could irreparably damage the League's role in containing Germany. At the height of the furore over the Hoare-Laval Pact, Churchill was vacationing in Spain and North Africa. 'Looking back', he wrote in *The Gathering Storm*, 'I think I ought to have come home', speculating that he might have been able to marshal the anti-government forces and bring down 'the Baldwin régime'. More likely, as historian Graham Stewart has observed, his speeches and correspondence at the time suggest that he (and many in the government) was genuinely undecided as to whether 'Geneva or Stresa represented the best hope of containing Germany.' Keeping away from Westminster allowed him to stay on the fence.⁵⁰

The Spanish Civil War merits only a brief discussion in chapter twelve of *The Gathering Storm*. There Churchill presents the two sides as

⁴⁸ *SWW*, 1, 67–9, 168, 598; cf. CHUR 4/141B, ff. 311–13.

⁴⁹ Rhodes James, *Churchill*, 328–9.

⁵⁰ *SWW*, 1, 144; cf. Graham Stewart, *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (1999), 243.

equally barbarous and states: 'In this quarrel I was neutral.' His main point is to endorse the official policy of non-intervention, on the grounds that, 'with all the rest they had on their hands the British Government were right to keep out of Spain'.⁵¹ In the early months of the Civil War, however, Churchill definitely leaned towards Franco and 'the Anti-Red' forces, as he often called them. 'I am thankful the Spanish Nationalists are making progress', he told his wife in September 1936, adding that it would be 'better for the safety of all if the Communists are crushed'. The following April he admitted to the Commons that, despite his attempts to remain neutral, 'I will not pretend that, if I had to choose between Communism and Nazi-ism, I would choose Communism'.⁵² Churchill, it should be remembered, remained a visceral anti-Bolshevik. Although he did not agree with many of the Tory right that Nazi Germany might be used to contain Bolshevism, it is possible that in 1936–7, with Hitler less menacing after the Rhineland crisis, Churchill's sense of priorities may temporarily have wavered. In February and April 1936, Popular Front governments came to power with Communist support in Spain and then France. In Spain, the election began the descent to civil war; in France, the ensuing rift between left and right seemed, at times, to presage something similar. Reiterating the need for Britain and France to keep out, he hinted in an article in August 1936, of deeper fears. A 'revivified Fascist Spain in close sympathy with France and Germany is one kind of disaster. A Communist Spain spreading its snaky tentacles through Portugal and France is another, and many may think the worse'.⁵³ It has often been observed that Churchill's lack of ideological zeal about Italy and Spain distanced him from many of his potential allies on the centre and left who supported the League. It is also possible that at times in 1936–7, he was uncertain about the greatest international dangers. Not until 1938–9, with Hitler on the march again and Franco in the ascendant, did he state clearly that a Fascist victory in Spain would be more dangerous to the British Empire.

On the other side of the diplomatic fence, Churchill tended to exaggerate the potential for a 'Grand Alliance' against Germany. This is a familiar point and can be discussed more briefly. With regard to France, it remains a matter of debate how far British appeasement was the reason or the pretext for French inertia in the 1930s. Churchill, as usual, includes qualifying passages that carefully straddle this divide. 'More than once in these fluid years French Ministers in their ever-

⁵¹ *SWW*, i, 167.

⁵² Gilbert, *Churchill*, v, 785; Churchill, *Speeches*, vi, 5850.

⁵³ See Rhodes James, *Churchill*, 406–9, quotation from 407; cf. David Carlton, *Churchill and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 2000), 50–61.

changing Governments were content to find in British pacifism an excuse for their own. Be that as it may', he adds, 'they did not meet with any encouragement to resist German aggression from the British.' And in characteristically counter-factual mode, he leaves the reader with the impression that, over the Rhineland and on other occasions, British resolve could have tipped the balance. Yet most historians of the period tend to locate relations with Britain in a complex of factors – political, economic and military – that shaped French policy.⁵⁴

On the Soviet Union, Churchill plays up signs of Soviet readiness to intervene in the Czech crisis of 1938. Again this issue remains a matter of controversy, but such evidence as has been gleaned from the Soviet archives strongly suggests that Stalin did not intend to take independent action to save Czechoslovakia and that he had not decided what to do if the French honoured their treaty obligations, thereby bringing his own into play. Churchill again registers the necessary qualifications, notably on Soviet good faith, but the weight of his account in chapters sixteen and seventeen is on the 'astonishing' degree of 'indifference – not to say disdain' displayed by British and French leaders towards the Soviet Union. For this, he adds in an allusion to the Nazi-Soviet Pact, 'we afterwards paid dearly'.⁵⁵ In support of his theme, he highlights a public declaration by Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet foreign minister, at the League of Nations and also private assurances made to him by Ivan Maisky, Stalin's ambassador in London, which Churchill passed on to the Foreign Office. (At an earlier stage, Churchill had a whole draft chapter entitled 'The Maisky Incident'.) Churchill also wrote of the 'intimate and solid friendship' between the Soviet Union and the Czech state, arguing that Stalin felt 'a very strong desire to help' the Czechs. This, he suggested, stemmed largely from 'a personal debt' felt to President Eduard Benes because the latter had forwarded intelligence of German contacts with the Soviet military, which triggered Stalin's purges in 1937. In the original draft Churchill accepted unequivocally that there was a genuine plot: 'This was in fact the great military and Old-Guard-Communist conspiracy to overthrow Stalin, and introduce a regime based on a pro-German policy.' Deakin persuaded Churchill to replace 'in fact' with 'a part of' and 'great' with 'so-called'. Deakin also proposed a qualification that the information supplied by Benes was probably planted by Soviet intelligence, in the hope that transmission by the Czechs would make it more credible to the paranoid Stalin, but

⁵⁴ *SWW*, 1, 151; cf. Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914–1940* (1995), 22–31.

⁵⁵ *SWW*, 1, 239–40; cf. Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš* (Oxford, 1996), chs. 4 and 7; Zara Steiner, 'The Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Czechoslovakian Crisis in 1938: New Material from the Soviet Archives', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 751–79.

Churchill relegated the qualification to a footnote and added that it was 'irrelevant'. Even after Deakin's editing, this anecdote (which Benes had told Churchill in 1944) added immensely to what Churchill called 'the salient fact for the purposes of this account', namely 'the close association of Russia and Czechoslovakia, and of Stalin and Benes'.⁵⁶

In contrast with later volumes of the memoirs, the United States does not bulk large in *The Gathering Storm*. It is, however, striking that one of Churchill's most trenchant criticisms of Chamberlain occurs over his handling of President Roosevelt's offer in January 1938 to convene an international conference to explore the basis of a general peace settlement. This cut across Chamberlain's plans for bilateral negotiations with Hitler and Mussolini, so the prime minister asked Roosevelt to delay his initiative. A few days later, pressed by Eden, he invited the president to go ahead. It is unlikely that Roosevelt had anything substantial in mind when he made his offer. But Churchill asserted: 'We must regard its rejection – for such it was – as the last frail chance to save the world from tyranny otherwise than by war.' That Chamberlain, he went on, in mounting incredulity, 'should have possessed the self-sufficiency to wave away the proffered hand stretched out across that Atlantic leaves one, even at this date, breathless with amazement'. Here, transparently, the Cold War context of *The Gathering Storm* shows through. After the intimate wartime alliance, after lend-lease and the Marshall Plan, it was indeed hard to recall the depths of suspicion entertained in 1930s Britain about American isolationism. Chamberlain's 1937 aphorism, that it was 'always best and safest to count on nothing from the Americans except words', was then an axiom in most of Whitehall and Westminster. In a way Churchill did not intend, he was right to say about British handling of the Roosevelt initiative: 'One cannot to-day even reconstruct the state of mind which would render such gestures possible'.⁵⁷

Together with his counterfactuals, Churchill's tendency to simplify the international scene in the 1930s – reducing several storm clouds into one – is a central weapon in his attack on British appeasement. But the clarity of Churchill's indictment derives not just from his simplification of events abroad. One of the most notable features of book one of *The Gathering Storm* is what he *doesn't* say about politics at home.

The 1930s are now conventionally dubbed Churchill's 'wilderness years'. He used that phrase on the last page of *The Gathering Storm*,

⁵⁶ *SWW*, 1, 224–6; cf. Deakin and WSC notes on CHUR 4/90, f. 45.

⁵⁷ *SWW*, 1, 196–9; cf. David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–1941: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (1981), 16–23, 31–2, 297.

where he referred to 'eleven years in the political wilderness', but it was popularised by Martin Gilbert's book *Winston Churchill: The Wilderness Years* and the related eight-part TV series shown on both sides of the Atlantic in 1981–2.⁵⁸ Historian Alastair Parker has, however, questioned the appropriateness of this term, arguing that in the 1930s Churchill tempered his criticism of the Government's foreign policy because of his persistent hopes of returning to office.⁵⁹ As recent historians of the Tory party have shown, the politics of the 1930s were more fluid than our impression of 'the era of Baldwin and Chamberlain' now suggests. However it may look in retrospect, therefore, Churchill did not expect to stay on the backbenches for more than a decade. Little of this emerges in *The Gathering Storm*.

Churchill's campaign against the government's India policy in the early 1930s seems, in retrospect, to be a quixotic flourish by an incorrigible diehard. But it is now clear that much of the Tory party was unhappy about the proposed devolution and that in early 1931 and again in mid-1934 the Government was in serious danger over its India Bill. Had Samuel Hoare, then spoken of as a future premier, not successfully covered up his manipulation of evidence to the Select Committee on India in 1934, Churchill might well have succeeded in his hope of evicting Baldwin and joining a reconstituted national government led by Austen Chamberlain. Yet, although the India Bill dominated British politics in 1933–5, filling 4,000 pages of Hansard with over fifteen million words, it is hardly mentioned in *The Gathering Storm*. To do so would have detracted from Churchill's focus on Germany. It would also have signalled Churchill's political motives, encapsulated in the celebrated Commons exchange when Leo Amery characterised Churchill's India policy with the Latin tag, 'Fiat iustitia ruat caelum.' Translate, demanded Churchill, whereupon Amery responded, to gales of laughter: 'If I can trip up Sam, the Government is bust.'⁶⁰

A new chapter opened in the summer of 1935, with the India Bill passed and Baldwin now prime minister. Churchill eagerly anticipated that the autumn election would produce a smaller majority for the national government, more attention by Baldwin to the Tory right and,

⁵⁸ Gilbert also used *The Wilderness Years* as the title for the 1981 volume of documents on 1929–35 that accompanied his official biography. In 1994, however, Sir Martin observed that the phrase now seemed to him 'less apposite' because, as the 1930s wore on, Churchill 'became a kind of one-man unofficial opposition', backed by a 'Cabinet' of former colleagues and civil servants, many of whom fed him information about Britain's defence weakness. Thanks to them, 'his wilderness years had been fully inhabited', Martin Gilbert, *In Search of Churchill* (1994), 109, 135.

⁵⁹ R.A.C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (2000), xi, 65, 261–2.

⁶⁰ See Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–1931* (1988); Stewart, *Burying Caesar*, esp. chs. 4–6, Amery quotation from 179.

in consequence, a cabinet post for himself, ideally the admiralty. He alludes to these hopes in *The Gathering Storm*, but represents his exclusion from office after the election as providential. '[N]ow one can see how lucky I was. Over me beat the invisible wings.' He takes the same line when relating how Baldwin passed over him for the new post of minister for the co-ordination of defence in March 1936. Although again admitting disappointment, Churchill wrote: 'This was not the first time – or indeed the last – that I have received a blessing in what was at the time a very effective disguise.'⁶¹

At the time, however, Churchill's passion for office was intense. On 8 March, the day after Hitler occupied the Rhineland, he called on Neville Chamberlain, then chancellor of the exchequer. According to Chamberlain's diary Churchill said 'he was in a very difficult position' because Stanley Baldwin did not propose to announce the name of the new minister until after the Commons debate on the Rhineland. Churchill said he 'wanted to make a "telling" (I understood in the form of a fierce attack on S.B.) speech if he were ruled out from the post, but not if there were any chance of its being offered him'. Chamberlain, who privately regarded this inquiry as 'an audacious piece of impertinence', declined to give any sign. On 10 March Churchill pulled his punches in the Commons, making little reference to the Rhineland while offering a broad and, in Chamberlain's words, 'constructive' survey of the defence scene. His reward, however, was the appointment of Sir Thomas Inskip on 14 March.⁶²

For the remainder of Baldwin's premiership Churchill acknowledged, albeit bitterly, that he had no chance of office. But when Neville Chamberlain succeeded Baldwin in May 1937, Churchill's hopes revived and this again affected his handling of foreign policy. Rearmament was now gaining momentum, Hitler was relatively quiet, and Churchill persuaded himself that the government was moving towards his policy of arms and the covenant. Then came Eden's resignation as foreign secretary in February 1938, mainly over conversations with Italy but also over Chamberlain's handling of Roosevelt's recent initiative. In *The Gathering Storm* Churchill devotes a whole chapter to Eden's departure as a major turning point. This begins with a stark statement of policy differences between Chamberlain and Eden. It ends with one of the most vivid purple passages in *The Gathering Storm*, when Churchill recalls

⁶¹ *SWW*, 1, 141, 157.

⁶² Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement*, 82–5. Interestingly, Baldwin had used a similar tactic during the crisis over the Hoare-Laval pact the previous December, pre-empting a possible assault from Austen Chamberlain, the Tory elder statesmen and backbench critic, by hinting that Austen might succeed Samuel Hoare at the Foreign Office. Once the parliamentary crisis had passed, the post was then offered to Eden. See Crowson, *Facing Fascism*, 58–65.

receiving the news of Eden's resignation while at Chartwell on the evening of 20 February. Throughout the war, he tells his readers, he never had any trouble sleeping, even in the darkest days of 1940. But that night 'sleep deserted me. From midnight till dawn I lay in my bed consumed with emotions of sorrow and fear', thinking of this 'one strong, young figure standing up against long, dismal drawling tides of drift and surrender'. But now, said Churchill, 'he was gone. I watched the daylight slowly creep in through the windows, and saw before me in mental gaze the vision of Death.'⁶³

Early drafts of this chapter, however, lacked the stark introduction and conclusion. One version opened with a passage of somewhat faint praise of Eden, later moved to page 190, and ended with Churchill's speech to Commons after Eden's resignation. In the book, this appears in the next chapter. Churchill's reworkings made the episode more dramatic. One of Churchill's readers, Lord Vansittart, who had been Eden's permanent under-secretary until December 1937, questioned Churchill's polarity between Eden and Chamberlain. Vansittart argued that the former was more concerned about Italy than Germany ('the real issue') and that, in consequence, the resignation was mistimed: Eden 'played his one big card at the wrong moment'.⁶⁴ Privately Churchill may have shared some of these reservations. The story of the sleepless night is not unique to *The Gathering Storm*: Churchill told it at least twice in private in 1945–6. But when he did so at Yalta the reason he gave for his sleeplessness was subtly different. 'I was too excited', he told Eden. 'It was a grand thing to do, but I never felt it was done in the right way. More could have been made of it'.⁶⁵ In fact, Churchill was often scathing about Eden in private during the 1930s. 'I think you will see what a lightweight Eden is', he told his wife in January 1936, after Eden was appointed foreign secretary. And in February 1940 Churchill went so far as to say 'he would rather have Chamberlain than Eden as Prime Minister by eight to one'.⁶⁶

In the light of recent research, the whole Churchill–Eden–Chamberlain triangle in 1938 looks very different from Churchill's account, written, it should be remembered, after Eden had served for most of the 1940s as Churchill's wartime foreign secretary and then as his

⁶³ *SWW*, 1, 201; drafts of chapter fourteen in CHUR 4/88.

⁶⁴ Vansittart to WSC, 10 Nov. 1947, CHUR 4/141A, f. 102.

⁶⁵ Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940–1965* (1968), 261; cf. Halifax, diary, 7 Mar. 1946, Hickleton papers, A 7.8.18 (Borthwick Institute, York). Back in 1943, Halifax recorded, Churchill also 'waxed eloquent over Anthony's resignation in 1938; said that he had staged it badly and hadn't made any effort to work with all the powerful factors (such as Winston!) who would have co-operated' (Diary, 23 May 1943, A 7.8.12.)

⁶⁶ WSC to Clementine, 11 Jan. 1936, Gilbert, *CV*, V, part 3, 11; Cecil H. King, *With Malice toward None: A War Diary*, ed. William Armstrong (1970), 22.

deputy leader in the postwar opposition. In 1938 Churchill viewed Eden's resignation from the foreign office as a shock, but not a mortal blow to his hopes of working with Chamberlain. Although abstaining in the opposition's vote of censure, Churchill was also the fourth Tory MP to sign a round-robin expressing continued support for Chamberlain and his policy.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1938 he still believed that a satisfactory agreement could be reached over the Sudetenland. As for his relations with Eden, the two men kept their distance from each other. The former Foreign Secretary, over twenty years Churchill's junior and icon of the Tory left not the right, was reluctant to associate himself with Churchill, now widely seen as one of yesterday's men. Eden was also trying to avoid political isolation and muted his criticisms to make himself credible for renewed office when Chamberlain was forced to broaden his government.

It was not until after Munich that Churchill's opposition to Chamberlain became unqualified. Again he abstained in the Commons, but this time only after being dissuaded from actually voting against his own leader. By contrast, both Eden and Leo Amery, the other leading critic of Chamberlain, were almost persuaded by the premier's final speech in the Munich debate to vote with the government rather than abstain, and they made conciliatory noises in private to Number Ten. Churchill did nothing of the sort this time, unlike February. In fact, he dramatised his opposition by sitting ostentatiously in the Commons chamber while the votes were counted. His ringing denunciation of Munich as 'a total and unmitigated defeat' contrasted with Eden's more tempered criticisms.⁶⁸ While Eden continued to pull his punches during 1938–9, Churchill eclipsed him as the most trenchant critic of appeasement. The government U-turn in March 1939 and the guarantees to Eastern Europe were seen as vindication of Churchill not Eden. In September 1939 a top job for Churchill was essential if the government were to seem serious about the war. He was given the admiralty and a seat in the new war cabinet. Eden, by contrast, although a former foreign secretary, could be fobbed off with a non-cabinet portfolio at the dominions office.

In retrospect, it was the end of his 'wilderness' decade. But throughout the 1930s, Churchill had agitated for office, both from frustrated ambition and from frustrated conviction, amply justified after 1939, that he could make a difference. His problem was tactical: was criticism or cooperation the best route back? Under both Baldwin and

⁶⁷ N.J. Crowson, 'Conservative Parliamentary Dissent over Foreign Policy during the Premiership of Neville Chamberlain: Myth or Reality?', *Parliamentary History*, 14 (1995), 322–3.

⁶⁸ Crowson, 'Conservative Parliamentary Dissent', 326–7. More generally see Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement*, chs. 8–10, and Stewart, *Burying Caesar*, chs. 11–13.

Chamberlain, the prophetic voice was often muted. At times, book one of *The Gathering Storm* is almost history with the politics left out.

Churchill's self-image of apolitical rightness in *The Gathering Storm* grated on some contemporaries. Lord Halifax, successor to Eden as foreign secretary, remarked to Chamberlain's aggrieved widow: 'I fancy the main purpose of the book is not only to write history, but, also, to "make a record" for W.S.C.' In a particularly nasty review, entitled 'Churchill's "Mein Kampf"', Michael Foot, the Beaverbrook journalist and co-author of *Guilty Men*, wrote of Churchill clothing his 'personal vindication in the garb of history ... In 500 pages Churchill hardly allows himself one admission of weakness or false judgment on his own part.' Foot added: 'The whole book, of course, is vastly more enjoyable and instructive than Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. But in personal conceit and arrogance there is some likeness between the two.'⁶⁹

As I have indicated in this essay, Churchill had indeed written a political memoir. His propensity for counterfactuals, his isolation of the German air threat from the mass of international problems facing British governments in the 1930s, and his simplification of the politics of that decade were all exercises in self-vindication. I have also tried to show how, despite his disingenuous disclaimer, this war memoir represented 'history'. The documents at his disposal, the stature he had attained as war leader and the lessons he drew from the past for the future all helped give his words an extra authority.

There was another reason for that authority – one worth dwelling on in conclusion since the thrust of this essay may seem to have belittled Churchill's achievement in *The Gathering Storm*. The most significant counterfactual in book one is Churchill's claim that Britain would have been wiser to fight Hitler in September 1938 over Czechoslovakia rather than a year later over Poland. At the end of the chapter entitled 'Munich Winter', he devoted three pages to this question.⁷⁰ Churchill had to acknowledge the core of the retrospective case for appeasement, namely that the extra year allowed Britain to modernise the RAF with Hurricanes and Spitfires and deploy the essential Chain Home Radar system. During the drafting he prepared an essay on how the Battle of Britain would have gone if fought a year earlier, in which he was forced to conclude: 'As the Battle of Britain was won on a very narrow margin in 1940 it may be argued that it might have been lost if fought in 1939.'⁷¹ In consequence, perhaps, he dropped this little setpiece from

⁶⁹ Halifax to Anne Chamberlain, 13 April 1948, Hickleton papers, A 4.410.18.4; Michael Foot, 'Churchill's "Mein Kampf"', *Tribune*, 8 Oct. 1948, 7.

⁷⁰ SWW, 1, 218, 263–5.

⁷¹ CHUR 4/92, f. 119.

the book and recast the air material. In the book he emphasised that, despite the danger of air raids on London, there was ‘no possibility of a decisive Air Battle of Britain’ until Hitler had occupied France and the Low Countries and thereby obtained bases in striking distance of southeast England. Churchill also insisted that the German army was not capable of defeating the French in 1938 or 1939. ‘The vast tank production with which they broke the French Front did not come into existence till 1940.’ His conclusion, therefore, was that ‘the year’s breathing-space said to be “gained” by Munich left Britain and France in a much worse position compared to Hitler’s Germany than they had been at the Munich crisis.’ This was the greatest ‘what if’ in *The Gathering Storm*. Although its force was diminished by Churchill’s cascade of counterfactuals and by his exaggeration elsewhere of the potency of airpower and of the Luftwaffe, most military historians would now agree with his verdict: 1938 was the time for confrontation, not negotiation.⁷² On the big issue, Churchill was, quite simply, right.

We should remember, however, that Churchill was not against appeasement *per se*. Occasionally in *The Gathering Storm* he does use the word in a pejorative sense: ‘“Appeasement” in all its forms only encouraged their aggression and gave the Dictators more power with their own peoples.’ But this is one of only a handful of explicitly negative references.⁷³ Moreover, when setting out some ‘principles of morals and action which may be a guide in the future’, he argues that those seeking ‘peaceful compromise’ are ‘not always wrong. On the contrary, in the majority of instances they may be right, not only morally but from a practical standpoint.’ The follies Churchill describes in *The Gathering Storm* are essentially those of men not methods. As his conduct of wartime relations with Stalin shows, he was not averse to negotiating with dictators. He returned from Yalta in February 1945 momentarily hopeful that the agreements would stick. ‘Poor Nevil[!]e Chamberlain believed he could trust Hitler’, he told his ministers. ‘He was wrong. But I don’t think I’m wrong about Stalin.’⁷⁴ Even when these agreements broke down, his line was not war but negotiation from strength. His address at Fulton in March 1946, now indelibly known as the Iron Curtain speech, was actually entitled ‘The Sinews of Peace’. And when in December 1950, at the critical moment of the Korean war, Prime Minister Clement Attlee promised that there would be no appeasement, Churchill set out his own position to the Commons: ‘Appeasement in itself may be good or bad according to the cir-

⁷² *SWW*, 1, 265; cf. Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, 1984), ch. 7.

⁷³ *SWW*, 1, 194; cf. pp. 261, 271, 372, 381.

⁷⁴ Hugh Dalton diary, 32: 28 (23 Feb. 1945) (British Library of Political and Economic Science, London).

cumstances. Appeasement from weakness and fear is alike futile and fatal. Appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace.' His efforts as prime minister in 1951–5 for a new 'summit' to achieve détente, analysed by John Young, were a continuation of this philosophy, for which he now used the term 'easement'.⁷⁵

By then, however, the forces arrayed against him were too strong. These included the foreign office, the Eisenhower administration and the Kremlin, not to mention his own stroke in June 1953. But there was yet another reason for his failure. As I noted at the start of this essay, Churchill lived a double life as politician and writer. In *The Gathering Storm* he transformed the fluid politics of the 1930s into enduring history. But during his second premiership Churchill again strove to make history as actor not author. By then, however, the 'lessons' of appeasement had become too strong. The images of Baldwin and Chamberlain, of the Rhineland and Munich, had become part of Western culture. And for that *The Gathering Storm* was, in large part, responsible. In the 1950s, one might say, Churchill was a prisoner of history – his own history of the 1930s. It proved easier to make history than to unmake it.

⁷⁵ Gilbert, *Churchill*, viii, 574; John Young, *Winston Churchill's Last Campaign: Britain and the Cold War, 1951–1955* (Oxford, 1996), esp. 8–10, 323–4.